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Steverink, N; Stevens, N; Dittmann-Kohli, F

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## Personal concepts of stability in the second half of life

Erika Timmer<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Nardi Steverink<sup>c</sup>, Nan Stevens<sup>a</sup>, Freya Dittmann-Kohli<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Psychogerontology, University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands*

<sup>b</sup>*Department of Social Gerontology, Free University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

<sup>c</sup>*Department of Internal Medicine and Geriatrics, University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

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### Abstract

The study contributes to the conceptualization of stability in the development of later life by answering four questions: Are there certain concepts of no-change in the population of aging adults? What are the issues that people combine with the idea of no-change? Are the issues of different importance for different groups? What kind of time perspective is expressed in their expectations of no-change?

Stability expectations were investigated within a representative sample of about 2934 Germans aged 40–85 who live independently in the community. By means of a sentence completion instrument subjects provided spontaneous statements about self and life conceptions.

Content analysis indicated clearly two different concepts of stability among the respondents in the second half of life: One concerns the continuation of gains, the other the maintenance of the status quo. One third of the expectations deals with further gains. Two thirds of the statements, however, refers to the maintenance of the status quo. Expected maintenance of the status quo showed a strong association with older age. In terms of Raynor's [Raynor, J. O. (1982). A theory of personal functioning and change. In J. O. Raynor & E. Entin (Eds.), *Motivation, career striving and aging* (pp. 249-302). Washington: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation] theory of the time-bound sense of self, the concept 'continuation of gains' reflects a future sense of self, while the concept 'maintenance of the status quo' refers to a more present sense of self.

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\* Corresponding author. Department of Sociology and Social Gerontology, Free University of Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1081 c, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

*E-mail address:* [EMG.Timmer@scw.vu.nl](mailto:EMG.Timmer@scw.vu.nl) (E. Timmer).

## 1. Introduction

Research on psychological development across the life span tends to concentrate on growth and decline associated with biological processes at a younger and older age (Baltes, 1997). Consequently, it mostly focuses on change. Life span development, however, might also be characterized by stability. Brunstein, Schultheiss, and Maier (1999) argue that change and continuity in personal goals are both necessary to master life transitions and to achieve a sense of developmental continuity. Baltes, Staudinger, and Lindenberger (1999) describe striving for maintenance as one of three major goals of developmental adaptation, along with attainment of gains and regulation of losses. Therefore, when adults think about their future, expectations of continuity, stability, and the maintenance of the status quo will be represented, along with ideas about positive or negative changes.

In earlier research, we asked young people about their most important goals in life. They predominantly mentioned goals that are expected to be achieved already in midlife: career, family, and home (Stevens & Timmer, 1994). So presumably, the orientation on achievement of gains may play a less important role when a greater part of these goals are accomplished, and instead, the maintenance of the status quo may be more desired. Brunstein et al. stress that with age, the search for new goals decreases, which is not associated with a decrease of psychological and physical well-being. This, according to the author, may indicate an increased importance of the goals in life already achieved when growing older. Certainly, stability is an important subject that deserves attention in studies on psychological development of adult persons.

Within life span developmental theories and research, the terms *stability*, *continuity*, and *maintenance* indicate the opposite of change. Sometimes the terms are used synonymously, though the meaning is slightly different. *Stability* is mainly used when referring to functioning (Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1995) and to behavioral patterns (Costa & McCrae, 2002). *Maintenance* in a life span developmental perspective often refers to the preservation of resources and avoidance of losses (Baltes et al., 1999; Westerhof, Katzko, Dittmann-Kohli, & Hayslip, 2001). Atchley (1989) uses the term *continuity*, considering predominantly the continuation of actions and intentions.

### 1.1. Purpose of the study and theoretical framework

In our study, we will not examine a predefined meaning of stability in a predefined domain. We will rather investigate what kinds of stability concepts people in the second half of life have in mind and what issues are raised when they refer to ‘no-change’. To discriminate different meanings of no-change, we use *stability* as a general term for *no change*, continuation, or continuity for going on with something, and maintenance of the status quo for keeping something as it is.

We want to attain a realistic picture of personal ideas of stability in the population. So we have to study personal cognitions that can be expressed spontaneously by everyone and do not need elaborate reflection. Spontaneous everyday doing and thinking is predominantly

anticipation of expected outcomes and situations, as is demonstrated by [Cameron \(1972\)](#). He asked about 4000 adult persons in various situations ‘what are you just thinking of?’ The subjects mentioned most of all future-oriented cognitions such as intentions, plans, and expectations, rather than cognitions concerning the present situation and past events. Therefore, our study is on ideas about stability expressed in anticipations.

Since anticipations are time-related cognitions, the theoretical framework has to take into account the personal time perspective. Personal time perspectives, in particular, the aspect of the person’s perception of life time or location on one’s path of life, is of particular relevance for life span development in the second half of life.

It is true that according to [Atchley](#), references to the past provide a sense of coherence and that continuity provides a certain predictability in the future. [Atchley’s](#) approach, however, does not focus explicitly on the person’s time perspective. Time perspective is more explicitly taken into account in [Erikson’s \(1982\)](#) theory of ego development, but only in his conception of the last developmental stage. In Erikson’s view, the last stage is, among other things, characterized by the consciousness of one’s personal finitude. Within the course of positive development, the aged person strives for ‘ego integrity’; that means coming to terms with one’s past, with one’s personal way and course of life. Nevertheless, also Erikson’s theory is not a theory of time perspective; only for the developmental task of the last stage of life the implicit consciousness of personal temporality is presupposed. According to Erikson, the developmental task of mature adulthood, generativity, that is, being productive for the benefit of the younger generations, is rarely time bound. He states that the mature person is primarily generativity oriented as long as their physical energy allows ([Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986](#)). Aspects of finitude and time-bound life projects are not a central issue in Erikson’s theory.

The consciousness of temporality should be considered more in theory and research on aging than hitherto. Recently, [Kennedy, Fung, and Carstensen \(2001\)](#) have raised this important aspect of life span development. It is true that behavior, intentions, plans, and anticipations of an aging person also depend on situational resources such as health and finances, but to a large extent, they are dependent on the perceived time left to live.

The personal time perspective, including the consciousness of endings and personal temporality, is thoroughly taken into account in [Raynor’s \(1982\)](#) concept of the time-bound sense of self. Depending on the time the person expects to live, he or she can be psychologically young or psychologically old. The psychologically young person has still a great variety of expectations to be actualized in the future; according to Raynor, he or she has a future sense of self. The psychologically old person, in contrast, is less concerned with the future and more concerned with the past or the present, thus representing more of a past or present sense of self. He or she is no longer primarily oriented to goals lying in a distant and uncertain future but is satisfied with the way of life achieved up to now. In this way, the psychologically old person resembles the person that has achieved ego integrity in the sense of Erikson.

In our view, Raynor’s time-related concept of human development is a particularly suitable theoretical framework for a study on personal expectations of stability in the second half of

life. Depending on their content, expectations of stability can indicate differences in the time-bound sense of self.

### *1.2. Research questions*

This study examines expectations concerning no change among 2934 Germans aged 40–85. By answering four questions, the investigation contributes to the conceptualization of the stability dimension in life span theory: Are there certain concepts of no-change to be found? What are the issues that people relate to the idea of no-change? Are the issues of different importance for different groups? What kind of time perspective is expressed in their expectations of no-change?

Lay concepts, that is, personal ideas concerning no-change, can be uncovered by investigating and categorizing issues people mention: The kind of expectation indicates their personal concepts. So in the first part of the study, we explore by content analysis the issues of stability expectations with which people in the second half of life are concerned.

There are probably different ideas in different groups according to their life circumstances. The representation of possible future scenarios in an individual's mind will depend on personal characteristics as well as on life conditions such as age, gender, health, and other aspects that influence development. Therefore, in order to find possible patterns of stability expectations, the second part of the study examines associations of background factors with the issues found by content analysis.

Age may be an important background factor because of the finitude of time, social roles, and energy. Expectations might also differ between men and women because of differences in life tasks and the difference in life expectancy. Issues of concern also depend on life circumstances in the region of residence, particularly when the region of residence influences culture and opportunities in life as it was the case for the western and eastern part of Germany. The German reunification caused discontinuities that deeply affected different domains of life. The time after the Wall came down meant for many East German citizens loss or uncertainty as to their former secure jobs and insecurity with respect to ownership. Additionally, many began to suffer disorientation as prescribed norms disappeared. Not only the economic system but also the systems of shared social identity lost their foundation. The economic and value-related insecurity brought about by these changes has not yet been overcome (Iganski, 2000; Navitel & Tooze, 2000). The process of changing living conditions is still going on in the eastern part of Germany, and for many older adults, the time after German reunification involved loss of continuity. Therefore, expectations of no-change might still be less represented in East Germany than in West Germany.

Education (cf. Lapierre, Bouffard, & Bastin, 1992–1993) and control beliefs (Steverink & Kempen, 1998) are also assumed to affect future expectations because they are important aspects of the individual's self-concept. Furthermore, state of health (Steverink & Kempen, 1998) and income are situational factors of immediate relevance for possible expectations of stability because they determine to a large extent what can still be accomplished.

The effects of these variables on the respective expectations are examined in the second part of the study.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

A sample from the German Aging Survey was used in the present study. The German Aging Survey (Dittmann-Kohli, Bode, & Westerhof, 2001) was carried out in 1996 in order to explore life conditions and life conceptions of people in the second half of life. A national sample of persons aged 40–85 was drawn by local authorities, stratified by sex, age, and place of residence in former East or West Germany. To obtain a population representing the most common life circumstances in middle and late adulthood, institutionalized subjects were not included (Infas Sozialforschung, 1997). Fifty percent of the individuals contacted were willing to participate.

The subjects were interviewed at home about living conditions and personal characteristics, including marital status, education, employment, perceived health, and control beliefs. Prior to the interview, a sentence completion questionnaire about self and life conceptions was completed by the subjects in the presence of the interviewer. After the interview, they were asked to fill in a ‘drop-off’ questionnaire including assessment scales on income and control beliefs. It was collected by the interviewer two weeks later. The response rate of the drop-off was 83.4%.

Non-response was higher among older persons, women, and West Germans. Sample selections were controlled for by non-response analyses through logistic regressions. Age, gender, region of residence, education, and health explained only 1% of the variance. So the definite sample does not show substantial significant biases compared to the original sample (Infas Sozialforschung, 1997).

For our study, content analysis was necessary. Due to the high costs of content analyses, for our study, a representative subsample of 2934 respondents was taken. It consisted of 48.1% men and 51.9% women, 45.7% of the persons aged 40–54, 36.3% aged 55–69, and 18% aged 70–85. The place of residence of 80.8% was in former West Germany, of 19.2% in former East Germany. This proportion is representative for the population.

### 2.2. Exploration of personal expectations of stability

Personal expectations were provided by the sentence completion questionnaire ‘SELE.’ The name was derived from the German words ‘Selbst’ (self) and ‘Leben’ (life). It was developed in order to elicit the expression of self and life conceptions in a nondirective manner (Dittmann-Kohli, 1995; Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof, 1999). This questionnaire was adopted and used for the German Aging Survey (Dittmann-Kohli et al., 2001). The instrument permits the participants to express their response in their own words and in accordance with their personal concerns.



The SELE consists of 28 sentence stems inducing different spontaneous combinations of contents. Six of them predominantly produce explicit references to the future. These sentence stems were selected to analyze anticipations ('In the coming years ..., I plan to ..., Later when I am older ..., I am afraid that I ..., I intend to ..., I fear that ...').

Most of the sentences of the SELE instrument are formulated in the first person singular. So the instrument stimulates that cognitions of immediate relevance for the person are retrieved, rather than general knowledge or opinions. Several studies indicate that in such procedures, cognitions are evoked, which were activated a short time before, because these can be recalled particularly fast (Dittmann-Kohli, 1995; Higgins, 1987). Blotevogel (1995) tested the test–retest stability by means of two measurements at an interval of four weeks. Among respondents who had experienced important events in their lives in the meantime, changes of themes occurred, in accordance with the change of cognitions relevant for the person. Persons who had not experienced changes confirmed their statements of the first measurement. This indicates stability with respect to the instrument and validity with respect to the personal relevance of themes. For Nuttin's sentence completion instrument MIM, which is very similar to the SELE, also a high test–retest stability was found (Nuttin, 1985).

Cross validation between life satisfaction measures provided by the closed instrument of Diener and satisfaction-related statements from the SELE instrument showed a high consistency (Westerhof, 2001).

Freund (1995) and Palys and Little (1983) stress the ecological validity of instruments stimulating expression of personal importance in contrast to preestablished lists of items. Partly open questionnaires are particularly suitable for investigating groups about which is only limited empirical knowledge. Freund also states that empirical knowledge specially concerning elderly people does not suffice in order to employ closed instruments. The real spectrum of themes relevant for them and their own 'dominant concerns' cannot be established by the use of closed instruments.

### *2.2.1. Content analysis*

For content analysis of the sentence completions, a hierarchically structured coding scheme was developed (Bode, Westerhof, & Dittmann-Kohli, 1998). On a general level, it provides categories for past-, present-, and future-related statements. In our study, first, future-related completions were extracted. Another level of classification provides codes for statements that refer to stability or change. So in a second step, we selected from the future-related statements all statements that refer to no-change. For the third step, content coding, about 300 hierarchically structured codes for seven domains of life were available. Coding was carried out by seven trained research assistants. Interrater reliability was measured by percentage of agreement of coding and reached an average of 81.5%.

The hierarchical structure of codes (for example 'health,' 'fitness,' 'mental fitness') allow for both fine differentiation and agglomeration of codes, dependent on the amount of variables the researcher wants to examine.

### 2.3. Associations of stability expectations with background factors

#### 2.3.1. Variables

The content categories discriminated by content analysis were used as dependent variables. The demographic variables age, gender, and region of residence in East/West Germany were provided by the Aging Survey. In order to get more differentiated age groups, but not to give up comparability of different studies within the Aging Survey, each of the three age groups (40–54; 55–69; 70–85) of the Aging Survey was subdivided into two (40–46; 47–54; 55–61; 62–69; 70–76; 77–85).

The independent variables health, education, income, and control beliefs were derived from structured questionnaires of the German Aging Survey. The health variable is based on one item that asks the subjects to assess their state of health on a five-point-scale. Because of the unequal distribution, the measures were reduced to the dichotomous variable of ‘good’ and ‘less than good’ (53% assessed their health as ‘very good’ or ‘good’, 47% as ‘less than good’). Level of education was measured in three categories: ‘high,’ ‘middle,’ and ‘low.’ Income was measured by equivalence income (Motel, 2000) in 14 categories. The control beliefs variable was derived from seven personal assessments of influence on a four-point scale, covering partnership, relationships with relatives, friends, and acquaintances, leisure, health, standard of living, and housing. Principal component analysis generated two components, the first explained 44.1% of the variance, the other one 17%. Factor loadings of the first component were between .56 and .73. For the second component, all loadings were lower; a second factor was not interpretable. The internal consistency of the items (Cronbach’s alpha) is .78; the mean inter-item correlation is .34. Perceived influence on each of the seven domains was assessed on a four-point scale. Measures of the seven items were summarized and divided into three equal groups: high, middle, and low control beliefs.

In order to investigate effects of the background factors on mentioning a topic, for each topic, logistic regression analysis was performed. The analyses involve all independent variables in order to control the respective influence of the other variables. Because of missing values on some variables due to the response rate of the drop-off, they were carried out for 2132 persons of the sample.

### 3. Results

The six sentence stems produced 2848 expectation of stability among the 2934 respondents. The possible range of mentioning stability is 0–6; the range we found is 0–4. On average, a person realized .98 stability expectations. Since six sentence stems completed by 2934 participants elicit up to 17,604 possible completions, this is 16% of the possible responses. A proportion of 4.5% of the sentences were not completed; from 2.7% statements, the inductor was rejected, 2.9% of the statements did not refer to the future, 12.3% of the statements could not be identified as referring to change or no-change. In contrast, 59.4% of the sentence completions referred to change. This supports



earlier findings that future anticipation is relatively infrequently about no-change, but mostly about expected changes (Klinger, 1994). For that reason, it is worthwhile investigating the less known cognitions of no-change.

3.1. Content analysis: concepts and issues of stability expectations

Clearly two different concepts of anticipation emerged. The first one refers to ongoing projects that involve further enrichment for the person or others. Issues mentioned cover several domains: work and achievement, traveling, commitment to or support for others, and hobbies. They concern production, generativity, and new experiences. The activities mentioned necessarily cause changes, new events, and experiences. Only desired or implicitly positive matters are mentioned. In order to be consistent with the common terminology in life span theory, we have to label this concept of stability reflected in the statements as ‘continuation of gains.’

The majority of the expectations with a stability connotation, however, represents a different concept of stability, that is the maintenance of the status quo, an actual present state. Here we found only two domains of content: maintenance of health and health-related resources on the one hand, and lifestyle and habits on the other hand. The expectations of the maintenance of the status quo also predominantly involve positive anticipations, but within this concept we found a small number of negative ones, some referring to unemployment, others to bad health, loneliness, or life in general.

Table 1 gives our categorization of concepts and topics mentioned within the concepts. In the following part, we describe the issues found in content analysis, illustrated by examples of statements.

Table 1  
Concepts of anticipated continuation and maintenance

N total	Continuation of gains	Maintenance of the status quo		
		1850 (65%)		
		Desired		Undesired
Content	Continuation of projects yielding gains (a) work and achievement (b) traveling, new experiences (c) commitment to others other (e.g., sports and hobbies, undertaking activities, personality development)	Maintenance of resources (53.6% of 1850) health and health-related resources (a) health (b) being able to live on one's own (c) physical and mental well-being others (e.g., staying together with somebody, keeping a livelihood)	Maintenance of lifestyle (46.8% of 1850) (a) attributes, behavior, living patterns (b) life in general	(0.6% of 1850) negative circumstances that do not improve, different contents

### 3.1.1. Continuation of gains

- (a) Within the content area of work and achievement, the continuation of career development and securing a livelihood is often mentioned.

In the coming years ... I'll go on being successful ... I hope to continue taking on interesting tasks ... I would like to carry on with my job ... I will still be active in my business ... I'll continue horse-breeding ... I am looking forward to continuing my jog and achieving a lot ... I shall carry on my work with great enthusiasm and learn new things ... I would like to continue working in my job and to improve my economic status.

- (b) Another content area includes statements about continuing traveling and about expectations of new experiences.

In the coming years ... I hope to continue traveling with my wife ... I would like to go on traveling and learning a lot ... I am looking forward to continuing sightseeing in Europe.

- (c) Within a content area 'commitment to others,' people mostly mention continued support of children and grandchildren; sometimes plans deal with continued public commitment.

In the coming years ... I'll still assist my children's development ... the children will still come first ... I would like to stay alive in order to help my son ... I will carry on working for a stable family ... I would like to carry on doing crafts and knit many nice things for my grandchildren ... I am determined to carry on helping where I can ... I want to carry on my voluntary work in clubs and associations.

### 3.1.2. Maintenance of the status quo

#### 3.1.2.1. Desired maintenance of the status quo: health-related resources.

- (a) When subjects refer to the maintenance of the status quo, general references to health are most frequent:

In the coming years ... I hope to stay healthy ... wish that I remain in good health.

- (b) A special health-related issue is the ability to live on one's own.

In the coming years ... I would like to remain self-sufficient ... I hope to keep on coping with household chores.

I intend ... to look after myself as long as I can ... to remain self-sufficient until the end of my life.

Later when I am older ... I would be glad to remain self-sufficient for a long time ... I would like to remain independent.

- (c) Sometimes the issue of health is specified as 'mental and/or physical fitness':

Later when I am older ... I hope I shall keep fit and well ... I hope to be as fit as I am today ... I hope that I'll still have all my marbles ... I would like to be as 'together' as I am now ... I intend ... to keep a keen mind for as long as possible.

### 3.1.2.2. *Desired maintenance of the status quo: lifestyle.*

- (a) Mentioned plans to maintain one's way of life clearly express intentions to continue acting in a certain way.

In the coming years ... I'll go on living in the same way as now ... I'd like to keep everything the same as it is now ... I will stay as I am.

I intend ... to carry on as now ... to stay as I am ... not to change.

Later when I am older ... I want to go on like before ... I'll not be very different ... I'll go on in the same way ... I'll do precisely the same as I do now ... I'll be the same ... I won't change anything ... I hope to be just as contented as I am today ... my lifestyle will be unchanged.

- (b) Within the content area of lifestyle, there are also statements that refer to the maintenance of the life in general. These statements are usually formulated as hopes, rather than as intentions.

In the coming years ... I hope that life will go on as usual ... I don't expect far-reaching changes in my life ... I hope things will remain the same.

Later when I am older ... I hope there will be no change in important matters.

### 3.1.3. *Undesired maintenance of the status quo*

Among the negative statements, no predominant issue was found. Examples of undesired maintenance are

In the coming years ... I will still be in the need of care

I fear that ... my standard of living will not get better ... I won't get a job again

... I will stay dependent on a wheelchair ... my hand will remain stiff.

## 3.2. *Effects of background factors on mentioning an issue*

Table 2 shows the associations of background factors with the topics mentioned by the respondents. Odd ratios in logistic regression analyses give the probability of mentioning an issue, compared to the reference category having a probability equal to 1. Due to the low amount of negative statements, associations with these issues were not examined.

### 3.2.1. *Continuation of gains*

- (a) Work and achievement are already significantly less important for respondents older than 62. They are more central in East Germany than in West Germany, and more central for those with middle or high control beliefs, compared to those with low control beliefs.

Table 2

Odds ratios in binary logistic regressions for each topic

	Continuation of gains			Maintenance of the status quo				
	(a) Work and achievement	(b) Travel	(c) Commitment to others	Resources: health and health-related resources			Lifestyle	
				(a) Health	(b) Ability to live on one's own	(c) Physical/mental fitness	(a) Attributes, behavioral and living patterns	(b) General life
	Exp. (b)	Exp. (b)	Exp. (b)	Exp. (b)	Exp. (b)	Exp. (b)	Exp. (b)	Exp. (b)
<i>Age (reference category, 40–46)</i>								
47–54	1.01	1.26	0.75	1.29	0.80	1.80	0.56*	1.12
55–61	0.78	2.81**	1.12	1.75*	3.32**	2.41*	1.01	1.40
62–69	0.25***	2.63**	1.83	1.88**	3.85**	3.40*	1.48	1.68
70–76	0.20***	2.18**	2.46**	2.75***	5.56**	4.79**	1.83**	2.50**
77–85	0.16**	1.03	0.87	2.63**	7.76***	3.10**	2.35**	2.39**
<i>Gender (reference category, male)</i>								
Female	0.78	1.17	1.37	1.06	3.24***	1.50*	1.00	0.89
<i>West/East Germany (reference category, West)</i>								
East	1.50*	1.21	2.09**	1.00	0.97	0.83	0.91	0.50***
<i>Health (reference category, good)</i>								
Not good	0.85	0.66**	0.85	0.84	1.40	0.74	0.70**	0.79
<i>Education (reference category, low)</i>								
Medium	0.69	1.70*	0.69	0.84	1.84*	1.74	0.85	0.87
High	1.08	1.81*	1.08	0.62*	1.53*	1.92*	0.82	0.82
<i>Income (reference category, low)</i>								
Medium	0.83	1.01	0.83	0.99	1.00	1.45	1.20	1.04
High	0.71	1.34	0.71	0.90	1.27	0.91	1.24	1.01
<i>Control beliefs (reference category, low)</i>								
Medium	1.83**	1.01	1.83**	0.97	0.91	1.22	1.11	0.89
High	1.70*	1.34	1.70*	0.88	0.65	1.36	1.49*	0.95

N=2132.

\* $P < .05$ \*\* $P < .01$ .\*\*\* $P < .001$ .

- (b) Continuing to travel is more a concern among the young old (55–76) than among the middle-aged and the oldest subjects; those plans are associated with good health, and they are more likely among those with a middle and high level of education.
- (c) Especially, the 70–76 year olds plan to continue their social commitment. In particular, people in East Germany are interested in continuing these tasks, also those who have higher control beliefs.

### 3.2.2. Maintenance of the status quo

#### 3.2.2.1. Desired maintenance of the status quo: health and health-related resources.

- (a) The older people are, the more likely they mention health; this does not hold, however, for the oldest group; for them, the issue is not more important than for the 70–76 age group. General references to health are found less often among more highly educated respondents.
- (b) The centrality of maintaining one's own home and self-sufficiency increases with age. The issue is strikingly important for the oldest group, it is, however, hardly mentioned by people younger than 55. Women are three times more likely to bring up this issue than men, and people of higher education mention this topic more frequently.
- (c) Women and more highly educated persons refer more often to physical and/or mental fitness. Like all issues regarding the maintenance of the status quo, this topic clearly becomes more central with increasing age.

#### 3.2.2.2. Desired maintenance of the status quo: lifestyle

- (a) Intentions to continue acting and behaving in a certain way emerged most often among the age groups of 70–85. The maintenance of lifestyle is least desired among the 47–54 year old, even less than among the reference group. These anticipations are related to better health and higher beliefs of control.
- (b) Older people are also more inclined to mention the maintenance of their general life situation, in particular the 70–76 years group. Furthermore, maintenance of the general life situation is more likely to be anticipated in West Germany than in East Germany.

The associations with age and other personal and situational characteristics help to understand the meaning of the respective kinds of stability expectations, which will be discussed in the following section.

## 4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to answer four questions in order to contribute to the conceptualization of stability in development of later life: Are there certain concepts of no-

change in the population of adults growing old? What are the issues that people combine with the idea of no-change? Are the issues of different importance for different groups? What kind of time perspective is expressed in their expectations of no-change?

We investigated stability expectations within a representative sample of about 3000 Germans aged 40–85 who live independently in the community. By means of a sentence completion, instrument subjects provided spontaneous statements about self and life.

Content analysis indicated clearly two different concepts of stability among the men and women in the second half of life: One concerns the continuation of gains, the other the maintenance of the status quo. One third of the expectations found deals with further gains. Two thirds of the statements, however, refer to the maintenance of the status quo. Continuation and maintenance ideas almost solely involve positive cognitions, dealing with desired issues. Although negative expectations are expressively elicited by the sentence stems ‘I fear that ...’ and ‘I am afraid that I ...,’ continuation and maintenance of undesirable situations do rarely appear: Concepts of expected stability have a generally positive connotation.

By means of the effects of age and further background factors, group-specific profiles of stability ideas in the second half of life have been uncovered.

#### 4.1. Concept ‘continuation of gains’

Considering the role of age with regard to the continuation of gain projects, commitment to further work and achievement shows a clear linear decrease, which mirrors the fact of being old with respect to working life from the age of 60. In the private sphere, however, the continuation of gains is a concern among the subjects up to the middle of their seventies. On the one hand, the projects involve one’s own enrichment, which seems to be facilitated by a higher level of education. On the other hand, enrichment of others is mentioned, predominantly by East Germans and those who have sound beliefs of control, that is, who are convinced that their commitment will be useful. The association with East Germany confirms earlier findings that the social cohesion is stronger in the East, which is related to a less individualistic life conception, caused by a greater necessity to support each other and a collectivistic ideology in the former German Democratic Republic (Diewald, 1995).

In plans and expectations concerning work and social commitment, generativity is expressed. This supports Erikson’s proposition that generativity can be a concern up to old age.

Considering the time perspective contained in the expectations, the ongoing projects mentioned extend into the future. They indicate that the person is committed to tasks and activities that are not completed until some future time. According to Raynor’s (1982) theory of the time-bound sense of self, this kind of cognition represents a ‘future sense of self.’ He characterizes persons with a future sense of self as ‘psychologically young’ because they expect that essential aspects of the self will still be realized in the future.

We can conclude that the continuation of gains concept is typical for the psychologically young.



#### 4.2. Concept 'maintenance of the status quo'

Regarding the content of statements about the maintenance of the status quo, these statements are often formulated generally and less concretely than the references to ongoing gains (e.g., 'In the coming years I'll go on in the same way as now' versus 'In the coming years I'll go on traveling'). This may be explained by the age of the respondents who express maintenance anticipations; all of these topics are significantly more often mentioned the older the subjects are. Earlier analyses of sentence completions indicate that older people formulate less specific contents than younger ones; this might be caused by their limited roles and activities, compared to younger subjects (Westerhof, 2001). The statements, however, can be clearly distinguished in concerns about resources and concerns about lifestyle. The resources mentioned almost solely refer to health and health-related functioning. 'Keeping fit' describes a positive personal standard of functioning. The finding that more women than men mention fitness can be explained by another aspect of functioning that is clearly represented among women, but rarely among men, that is, the ability to continue living on one's own: Since more women than men outlive their partners and have to go through their last years without the support of a spouse, this is an issue of particular concern among women.

In addition to health and health-related resources, one's current lifestyle turned out to be an important domain in which maintenance is desired. Statements referring to the maintenance of personal habits and the present life can be understood as an expression of satisfaction with one's self and life. These cognitions rarely occur among subjects younger than 70; they typically arise among the two oldest groups. In terms of Erikson's life span theory, the intentions to keep traits, lifestyle, and behavior unchanged can be interpreted as attained state of ego integrity, introduced by Erikson as a positive state of late adult development. In his view, successful aging includes acceptance of one's own life history in older age when important changes and positive developments are unlikely to happen any more.

We found that subjects who are healthy and subjects with a high sense of control anticipate that they will maintain their present attributes, behavior, and lifestyle. These statements are formulated as explicit intentions, and not as cautious wishes. Regarding the widespread assumption in society that older age is particularly prone to losses, we learn that the idea of vulnerability does not appear to be as common among the aging population itself as is generally assumed. The statements mirror a group of energetic old people still living independently who do not feel exposed to uncontrollable developments.

Along with plans, there are also wishes mentioned that life in general will go on unchanged; they also indicate satisfaction with the current state of affairs. The findings that these wishes more often occur among West Germans than among the East Germans reflect the differences in life circumstances described above: The process of changing living conditions is still going on in the eastern part of Germany; East Germans do not yet experience their lives in habitual patterns that give a feeling of security and satisfaction, as is the case for the older people in West Germany.

In regard to the time perspective, the analysis of maintenance expectations leads to interesting insights. While the sentence stems are directed to the future, the respondents'

sentence completions about the maintenance of the status quo very clearly refer to the present conditions, state, and situation. This indicates that the present time is prominent in the person's cognitive system. These 'maintenance of the present state' statements represent what Raynor calls a present sense of self. The person is not concerned with projects that are to be realized or completed in the future. This sense of self characterizes a 'psychologically old' person, indicating their consciousness of limited time left. With old age, the present time perspective often becomes a perspective of an 'open present': the person is not directed to the future, but lives from day to day (Rakowski, 1986). The topics of maintaining the status quo are predominantly mentioned by subjects in their seventies and eighties—the age when the time horizon has become relatively short. This finding may support studies that indicate a shift from future orientation to an open or 'timeless' present in later life (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Rakowski, 1986). This shift generally represents a realistic assessment of the time left to live and of the diminishing possibilities to plan long-term projects.

#### 4.3. Shortcomings and suggestions for further studies

A study based on one measurement point has its weaknesses. Our research shows differences between East and West Germany that may disappear in the next years when living conditions become more similar. Furthermore, maintaining the ability to live independently may also become an essential concern for men as more men will live alone, due to the increase in divorce and the increase in male life expectancy.

Age effects found in this cross-sectional study may represent differences between cohorts rather than differences between developmental states of individuals.

Further research on personal perceptions with large representative samples would provide the opportunity to compare personal expectations of people in the second half of life at different times and circumstances. We found two different concepts of expected stability, perceived by an aging population, which contribute to a better understanding and definition of the stability dimension in a life span perspective: continuation of gains and maintenance of the status quo. But there are unanswered questions. For example, why does income not influence concerns that are mentioned? An answer may be found in the kind of expectations, which perhaps do not need money as prerequisite.

Moreover, there may be other important factors of influence that are not included in this study. Further research including variables that describe the personal situation, such as marital status and psychological well-being, might be useful for further elaboration of the concepts of the continuation of gains and the maintenance of the status quo.

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